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SUBJECT: DP vs. SP - A Tale of Two Strategies

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: With the campaign period now officially open, the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and opposition Socialist Party have deployed widely differing campaign strategies in order to get to 71

seats - the bare number necessary to secure a majority in the 140 seat parliament. The DP has assembled a large, 17-party coalition that it hopes will give it an advantage in rural areas. The DP's campaign will focus heavily on touting GOA achievements over the past four years, and will count on the DP's solid party organization to help secure victory. The SP, on the other hand, hopes to capitalize on Berisha fatigue, and fallout from the Gerdec tragedy and other corruption scandals, as well as a generally left-leaning electorate, to boost the SP's chances. Post's overall assessment at this point is that although the ruling DP appears to have the momentum for now, neither party is likely to secure an outright majority of seats via the election, forcing whichever party wins a plurality of seats to form a governing coalition. END SUMMARY.  
DP Pitches its Big Tent

12. (SBU) DP MP and party strategist Ilir Rusmajli told PolOff that the DP's 17-party coalition would give the DP a small advantage, in that it would attract more rural votes than the SP's much-smaller 5-party coalition. According to Rusmajli, even though none of the 16 other parties within the DP coalition are likely to get enough votes to get their own seats in the next parliament, the votes cast for those parties will remain within the DP coalition as rural voters cast votes for regional favorite son candidates. SP strategist Kastriot Islami agreed with this assessment, telling PolOff that SP Leader Edi Rama had made a mistake in putting together such a small coalition. Rusmajli estimated that the DP's coalition partners would add 1-2 seats to the DP vote total - enough, he claimed, to make a big difference in a close election.

13. (SBU) But the SP has done its own coalition math as well. The SP signed a last-minute deal to add the almost entirely ethnic-Greek Human Rights Party to the SP coalition. SP strategists estimate that the HRP could add 3-4 seats to the SP coalition's total. The HRP is strong in the south where Albania's Greek minority lives, but is practically non-existent in the north.

DP "Cohesiveness" vs. a Fractured SP

14. (SBU) Rusmajli claimed that the SP suffers from internal divisions, a view echoed by other, non-DP observers. Rusmajli said the SP's traditional base of old-style Socialists was disconnected from Edi Rama and the new "volunteers" Rama was bringing in to help the campaign. Other observers agreed that the SP base was divided between Rama, former PM Fatos Nano and former PM Ilir Meta supporters, but were uncertain what effect this might have on SP turnout. The DP, on the other hand, has had only one standard bearer from the very beginning - Prime Minister Sali Berisha. Although this undoubtedly gives the DP a more cohesive base, it also

risks alienating voters on both sides suffering from Berisha fatigue.

Do the Issues Matter?

15. (SBU) As expected, the DP will run on the record of the Berisha government, touting economic growth, NATO membership, and the nearly-completed Durres-Kukes road, to name a few. Expect a long, and well publicized series of ribbon cuttings between now and the election. Although the SP platform centers on making education more accessible for Albanians, the real focus of the SP campaign will be harsh criticism of the Berisha government over corruption and unemployment. The Gerdec tragedy will also feature prominently in the SP campaign, with Rama pointing to Gerdec as a symbol of everything that is wrong with the Berisha government. Finally, the SP is hoping that Berisha-fatigue will convince large numbers of voters to vote SP.

16. (SBU) But as nearly every political observer will point out, the Albanian electorate is fairly rigid in its loyalties, with relatively few "swing voters" in the American sense. The consensus view is that issues matter little to most voters, and that national elections generally are a referendum on the incumbent, with much less thought given to the vision or promises of the challenger. This was clearly the case in 2005, when voters, turned off by the Socialist PM Fatos Nano's over-the-top corruption, threw out the SP.

Getting to 71

17. (SBU) Rusmajli claimed that according to DP calculations, the DP

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coalition will secure 71 seats in the elections - thereby giving the DP the right to form the next government. Others both within and outside of the DP are not so certain, with most believing that neither the SP nor DP coalition will reach the magic 71. According to the law, whichever coalition wins a plurality of seats will receive the first invitation from the President to form a government. Should they not be able to form a ruling coalition, the President will then invite the next-largest vote getter to try and form a 71-seat majority.

First Mover Advantage

18. (SBU) The jury is still out as to who - Edi Rama or Sali Berisha - would have an easier time forming a governing coalition should neither one win an outright majority. But it may not matter. Whichever party gets a plurality of seats via the election will have a huge advantage in that once seats are allocated to each coalition, each new deputy becomes a free agent, with the ability to abandon their parties and join the other side should they so choose. Whichever side gets the first crack at forming a government will almost certainly offer whatever it takes - with ministries, cash or other incentives a certainty -to lure deputies to their side in

order to form a 71-seat majority. Both the DP and SP coalitions contain a large number of candidates that will eagerly sell themselves to the highest bidder, meaning an invitation by the President to either Rama or Berisha to put together a government could touch off a bidding war for the loyalties of a few key deputies.

Advantage (for now): DP

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19. (SBU) COMMENT: In the end, this election hinges more on organization than issues. Whichever party proves better able to mobilize its base, put together a better campaign organization, and do a more effective job of horse-trading and coalition building is the one most likely to end up in control of the next government. For now, the DP has the momentum and the organizational edge, not to mention the substantial advantages of being the incumbent. But with the official campaign only just beginning, much can and will change between now and June 28. In other words, it's still early.